

Celebration of the Incarnation

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Bible Text: John 1:1-14

Preached on: Sunday, December 20, 2015

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Let's go this morning to the Gospel of John, John chapter 1. I have a hand full of sermons that I preach regularly on purpose and this is one of these. This was written in a hospital room at ECM Hospital on Christmas eve night because my firstborn child had been born and so sitting in the bed beside my wife with a little baby girl in her arms, I wrote this sermon. Now, it has grown and developed some but the basic message is still the same and, you know, when you've pastored 35 years in one place like I have or right at 35 years, you've got to be careful not to just preach stuff that's important, but then again, pastors can get in trouble trying to bring something new out all the time because the truth is the truth. But there are a hand full of things that I like to preach, not because of the sermon but because of the truth in the sermon is important to remember.

This is the celebration of the incarnation. John 1:1-5 and verse 14.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. 5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Verse 14,

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John uses the word "Word" to describe Jesus. It's the Greek word "logos." It simply means "to speak or to express an opinion." Ancient philosophers like one Greek philosopher used the word "logos" as representative of the principle that controls the universe. The ancient stoics used to use it as a word to express the soul of the world. But here John takes this word "logos" and he uses it like the Hebrews of the Old Testament; he uses it to express the very manifestation of God, the logos of God.

Now, in John 1:18 he makes it clear that Jesus has explained him. When Jesus came, he showed us God. He's the manifestation of God. He is the manifestation of God specifically, not generally. Jesus didn't come to give us a general idea of what God is like and not partially, he didn't come as part of what God is, he's God essentially. So in Christ, God has spoken to us his very thoughts. His very wisdom. Hebrews 1:2 reminds us, God "in these last days has spoken to us in His Son."

Now, John the Baptist was the forerunner. He came to announce Jesus has come and he's right behind me, in effect, but John was the voice. Jesus is the Word. He is the truth. He is the amen. He is the faithful witness of the mind and the wisdom of God. That's what happened on Christmas: God came to earth. But the true meaning of Christmas and actually the true meaning of the Gospel, the truth of the church, the truth of everything we hold precious and dear as Christians, is constantly being smothered under the cloaks that modern culture cast over it and so it is, of course, with the true meaning of Christmas. When I was a boy, there was a lot of mythologizing of the Christmas story. There were little animated cartoons that would come on tv and it would have the manger scene and there'd be some animals talking there, one of them had a little drummer boy playing his drum, and they would just kind of make it into a mythological story perverting the true biblical teaching of the incarnation event. And there is the minimalizing of the story and we see that so often today, just take the message of Christ coming and just dumb it down to something that will accommodate everyone's general thoughts about love and hope and peace. As a matter of fact, one of these home and garden television shows recently added Kwanza into their overall Christmas holiday celebration; let's just mix it all together and sort of minimize the true meaning of Christmas. Then, of course, there's the crass commercialization. That's another cloak that's put on and smothers out Christmas. I mean, Christ's birth has become a pillar in the religion of materialism and that, indeed, is not what our Lord had in mind.

This morning, let's remind ourselves what God intended in the incarnation, the coming of Jesus Christ, and we know from the word of God that in that first Christmas God initiated worship in the form of rejoicing and celebrating, rejoicing in God and in his great work of sending his Son to be the Savior of the world. And so we find out that a big part of worship is rejoicing and celebrating in what God has done, in God's great power, in God's great wisdom and in God's great beauty to send his Son and initiate and carry out such a glorious plan of redemption for his children. As a matter of fact, God made sure this would happen. In Luke 1, we see the angel speaking to Zacharias in the temple. Zacharias was the father of John the Baptist who, of course, is the forerunner of Jesus, and the angel tells Zacharias that, "You're going to have joy and great gladness in the fact that your son gets to be the forerunner of Jesus." And then again in Luke 1 when Mary was told by the angel that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit with the very Messiah promised to the Jews, she rejoiced greatly and rejoiced greatly over how that when she met her relative, Elizabeth, who was carrying John the Baptist in her womb, John in the womb of Elizabeth rejoiced greatly over being in the presence of the yet preborn Jesus Christ. In Luke 1, again Zacharias, her husband, hears all that's unfolding. He praises God again. In Luke 2, Mary gives birth to Jesus and the angels announce the birth and the shepherd said, "This is good news of great joy." Then later, a multitude of angels come and appear

praising God and the shepherds see that and they go and see Jesus and the Bible says they see Jesus and they rejoiced exceedingly. Simeon, after Jesus is born he is presented at the temple and Simeon, a devout man, takes the baby Jesus in his arms and he praises God and blesses God. Then Anna, a devoted widow who spent all of her time serving God in the temple, she sees the baby Jesus and she begins to rejoice and give thanks to God.

Everything about worship connected to Christmas in the Bible is about celebrating and rejoicing in what God has done so if we're going to worship God this Christmas, we ought to rejoice in the great things God has done but let's remember that as we worship and celebrate him, there are some specific things. Now, once again, this liberal world, the secular progressives, the liberal pastors and theologians, get away from the biblical truth of Christmas. We don't have the right to rejoice in it the way we feel about it, we want to rejoice in Christmas the way God says it is so let's do that for just a few moments this morning. If we truly worship and rejoice and celebrate Christmas, we rejoice and celebrate remembering his heritage. Remembering his heritage. The text tells us in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word." This speaks of Jesus being the preexisting one. In the beginning was the Word. You see, Jesus was there when the beginning began. He didn't begin at his incarnation, being born of the virgin in Bethlehem about 2,000 years ago, he was already in existence before that. In Genesis 1:1, the Bible says, "In the beginning God created." The word "God" is the Hebrew word "Elohim"; it has a plural context. Why would it be plural? It's plural because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were there and present. In Genesis 1:26 the Bible says, "Let Us make man in Our image," plural pronouns. Why plural pronouns? Because God is one but, yes, he's also three in one: he's God the Father; he's God the Son; and he's God the Holy Spirit.

And I might remind you that in reality, his incarnation didn't really begin when he was born of the virgin Mary and laid in the feed trough. In Genesis 32, Jacob said he wrestled with a man all night long and then at the morning, the man released him, and then Jacob said, "I have seen the face of God." Who is the man whom Jacob said, "I have wrestled with this man and he had the face of God"? It was a preincarnate appearance, physical appearance, of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Joshua 5, Joshua has been commissioned to lead the nation of Israel across the river into the Promised Land and he must have had some anxiety about that. He's walking by himself in the darkness and one appears before him, a mighty warrior with sword drawn, and Joshua didn't know who he was and Joshua said, "Who are you? Are you for us or are you for them?" It's as if he said, "Well, I didn't come to take sides, I came to take over." He said, "I'm the Captain of the Lord's host and the ground where you're standing is holy ground." Who is this one that appeared to Joshua before he was prepared to take the conquest into the Promised Land? That man standing there that day was the Lord Jesus Christ. He was already in existence. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego refuse to worship the idol. They're thrown into a fiery furnace and the wicked pagan king looks into the fiery furnace and he says, "Behold, I threw three men in the fiery furnace but there's a fourth man walking around in the fire and he looks like a son of the gods." Who was the fourth man in the fiery furnace who had a different appearance and a different visage about him than the other men? He was

Jesus Christ appearing before his birth in Bethlehem. In John 8:58, Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am."

That baby born and laid in the feed trough in Bethlehem was the preexisting one. He didn't start there, he already was. But secondly, not only in the beginning was the Word, secondly, he was with God the text tells us. That speaks of him being the prestigious one. Prestigious one. Prestige in the sense that Jesus has a dignity and a distinction from all others. No other can ever have claimed to have been with God the way Jesus was with God, that is, with his heavenly Father whom he's known intimately from the beginning. You see, Jesus is one of grand and unmatched distinction. From all eternity, there existed a oneness and a unity between God the Father and God the Son that is completely incomparable and incomprehensible to any human unity we might know about; much, much greater than the bond of parent to child or any other we might come up with. It's incomprehensible to the human mind.

Many years ago, there was a girl in Great Britain, she was Diana of Wales, but then she became engaged to Prince Charles and then she became Princess Diana. Why? It was because who she was now connected to. There was a prestige now that she did not have before. Jesus, the Bible says, was there in the beginning and he was with God. Unique, distinct, dignity, prestige that no other has ever had. Hebrews tells us also his incarnation, while it didn't actually truly and fully begin in Bethlehem because he had already existed on earth, he had appeared on earth before that, but also his incarnation did not end at the tomb. The Bible said he ascended back up into heaven and there he is, the man. There is a man, by the way, on the throne of the universe today and his name is Jesus. Hebrews 9:24, "For Christ has not entered the holy place made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God for us." So also the man, Christ Jesus, right now ever lives to make intercession for us at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus' incarnation and oneness with God did not begin in Bethlehem or at his birth and it did not end at his death.

"In the beginning was the Word." He is the preexisting one. "The Word was with God." He's the prestigious one. "And the Word," John says here in chapter 1, verse 1, "was God." This is where the liberals lose their minds. They can kind of say, "Well, God sent us a good example. God sent us a good teacher. God sent us a model of selflessness and caring for the downtrodden," but they cannot grasp that this man was God. That speaks of him being the preeminent one. The preeminent one. The Word was God. You see, in the beginning, Jesus wasn't just there with God, Jesus was there as God. Theologians use the phrase "He is God of very God." Brothers and sisters, this is a cardinal foundational doctrine of our faith. We cannot waver, we cannot flinch, we cannot vary on this doctrine one iota. He is fully God. Not like God. Not somewhat like God. He is God himself because our whole salvation and the veracity of the atonement depends on him being God and man at the same time.

Now, modern cults like ancient pagans come up with their demigods, they would call them. There's this image of Jesus as being above men. He's like men in a lot of ways, but he's above us and stronger and more powerful, but they put him below what they would

call the true God. The Scriptures do not do that. The Scriptures require us to hold to Christ as God of very God. For example, Hebrews 1:3 says he is the radiance of God's glory which means he's the outshining and the outpouring of pure deity. Hebrews 1 continues and says he's the exact representation of God's nature. Hebrews 1:8, we have God calling Jesus God. In Colossians 1:15 the Bible says he's the image of the invisible God. In Colossians 1:16 he's the Creator of all things. Now, the skeptics may ask, "Well, how in the world could God become human and still become God?" Well, it takes God to do that. In Colossians 1:19 the Bible says all the fullness, all the fullness of deity dwelled in him. In Colossians 2:9, all the fullness of deity dwelt in bodily form, referring to Jesus Christ. Then again in Colossians 1:18 that in all things he might have the preeminence. So as we worship and rejoice and celebrate, somehow by the aid of the Holy Spirit we take our hearts and our minds to that scene in Bethlehem and there's a little baby laying in a feed trough in a stable who was the preexisting, prestigious, preeminent one, God himself, and we celebrate and we rejoice with Zacharias and with Anna and with Mary and with Joseph and with the shepherds and with the wise men over what God has done.

Now we go a little further. Christian truth is such that you can't see it and embrace it without it changing you. You see, in Christian worship, behavior always changes because the heart changes. It's the only truth, it's the only, I hate to use the word with Star Wars being out, "The Force be with you," but it's the only force in the world that really changes the heart. This guy used to be an editorialist in our paper a few years ago; I'm glad he's no longer writing for our paper. He's a Baptist pastor over in Decatur and his summary of the Christmas message is: the little one who entered the world in weakness and vulnerability came to reveal a way of life that if adopted and followed has the power to transform everything we know and see. So basically you're on human strength and ability. You just learn to be like Jesus, at least the Jesus he would define for you, not necessarily Scripture gives you, because we've been going through Luke, amen? You do half of what Jesus did in Luke and you're going to get in big trouble. You can't follow Jesus all the way through because you're not God incarnate. He was God incarnate. So this guy, nothing about the new birth, nothing about repentance of sin, nothing about being born again, nothing about confessing your sin and God changing you, just put on a new way of living by following the example of Jesus and the world is going to be better and that's what Jesus is all about. That is radically unbiblical and wrong. Christ came because he can change men from within. It's called the new birth. It's called being born again. Paul called it being quickened from the dead; new life coming in and regenerating the heart.

So when that happens at Christmas as we're rejoicing and celebrating on what God did, we also worship by renewing our own lives, having a renewal of what we're about as Christians. I put this under two headings from our text. First of all, we ought to this Christmas worship by renewing the manner of our lives. The manner of our lives. In verse 14, John says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." You just read that and then you go on but don't just do that. "The Word became flesh." I call that a condescension beyond comprehension. God put on human form and didn't dwell among just lowly perfect humans but wicked, sinful, rebellious, God-denying humans. He veiled his glory. That speaks of humility. There is a humility in the incarnation that's absolutely

incomparable. We can't really grasp it but I hope we feel something of it. He didn't come to a castle or a palace. He did not come in regal splendor or glory. He did not come in that first coming at least, as a mighty ruler, but the baby of a poor family, lying in a feed trough and that speaks of what we ought to do at Christmas when we renew that whatever else we ought to be as Christians we ought to be humble people. Now humility doesn't mean weakness. This humble Jesus ran people out of the temple with a bullwhip and turned over tables. This same Jesus showed the most manly courage I've ever seen studying his life as he stood against the powers of the day and publicly rebuked and corrected them for their error. But he did come in great humility and we ought to renew the manner of our lives concerning humility.

Secondly, not only humility but in holiness. A renewal of holiness. If you had told me when I was a teenager that I would live in a country and I would live in a world that glories in the filth that our world glories in, I mean, I just never dreamed that we would live in a day where men would openly celebrate what God calls overt wickedness. But we ought to this Christmas as we think on Jesus coming and the Bible tells us, "The Word became flesh," verse 14, "and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father." At his birth, the angels appeared and what did they say? "Glory to God in the highest." Why? Because a holy one had come to be among us. The magi came bringing precious gifts. Why? Because a holy one, one unlike us. Holiness has lots of concepts we can't completely comprehend, but one of the fundamental concepts of holiness is he's other than us and you and I are to live other than the world. You've got to be careful, now. There's a balance here because too many like the Amish and the Mennonites and even other groups today try to put on a different physical appearance to call that holiness and far too often the only thing different about them is the physical appearance. It's a holiness of heart that we're not of this world. This is not our final home. This isn't where our treasure is. He was born of a virgin. Why was he born of a virgin? Because he was holy and we ought to renew a commitment to holiness as we worship this Christmas.

But not only do we renew the manner of our lives looking at his incarnation, I think we're also challenged to renew the mission of our lives, and I might even say the mission of our church. The Bible says in verse 14, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Now that's very interesting. He came full of grace and full of truth. He came full of grace and truth because he came looking for sinners. Sinners can only be saved through the truth and sinners can only be saved if God has the grace to favor them with salvation. This is an evangelistic message is what this is. Right here in the story of the incarnation and the coming of Christ, it's all about him coming to save sinners. He will come, the angel said, to save his people from their sins, Matthew 1:21. And I might add to you, when Jesus died on the cross, he did save his children from their sins. Something actually did happen on the cross. Jesus didn't die just to offer a prospect of what might happen, Jesus died to procure what he wanted to happen. He redeemed his children. He did save them and now he ever stands at the right hand of God the Father and presently interceding for his children. He is saving them and working in our lives through the power of the Spirit and the ministry of the word and the fellowship of the saints to

sanctify us so he did save us and now he is saving them and, thirdly, he will save them. There is coming a day when he will finish the plan he began from the foundation of the world to have for himself a people that would know him and love him and fellowship with him and worship him forever and he will save us in the ultimate sense of presenting us as glorified before him in heaven and there will be no longer even a vestige of sin and unholiness and unrighteousness. All that will be taken away and everything will be perfected and glorified in his presence.

You know, Jesus never said, "Remember my birth." We don't have that in the Scriptures. He never said, "Remember my birth." Not that it's wrong to remember his birth, but I think what is wrong is it's wrong to remember his birth without remembering his death. They always go together. Paul didn't say, "I, Paul, I preach Christ born of Bethlehem, born of the virgin." That's true and I'm sure Paul did teach that, but what he means is he said, "I preach Christ crucified." You don't ever separate the incarnation from the crucifixion and that's what we have in our world today and that's why we can have all of these hippies and country music stars and secularists and worldlings singing these Christmas songs because they just skim over the parts. And by the way, a lot of the old Christmas songs are full of the truth of the atonement and his sacrifice for sins and his saving of sinners, but they sing it in a way that they want to leave that part out. You can't leave that part out. So we renew the manner of our lives and then we renew the mission of our lives that we are here to be a part of God's quest to save sinners.

I was at a place cleaning up my car just this last week and I was talking to a man and got to share something of my testimony and something of the Gospel with that man. You know it's a busy setting and, by the way, we're not to go to other people's employees and take up their time even to share the Gospel. That would be wrong so I had to be brief but I did get to share something of the Gospel and, you know, you just never know where a Gospel seed may go and we need to renew in our hearts this Christmas, "Lord, we're here to be a part of your overall work of winning the lost to Jesus Christ." And one of the main ways that God intends for us to do that is to be a part of the fellowship of a church that's committed to missions and evangelism and church planting. Jesus came on a quest for souls so if we properly rejoice and celebrate and worship him this Christmas, let's renew our mission to be on mission of him.

I read in a book many, many years ago, John MacArthur had a little book and he had this illustration in the book. He said there was a very wealthy Boston family. They had their firstborn child and in their church's tradition they take the baby as soon as they get out of the hospital to the church and they're christened by the priest and in their tradition, after the christening ceremony, they bring the child home and invite all of their friends and relatives over and actually have a big party. The mom had taken the little infant child and she placed it in the middle of the front bedroom bed and it was a really cushy bed and the covers were kind of wrapped up around his little bed and she thought the baby would be fine there. But one of the guests came in, was in a hurry, was excited about the party, and carelessly threw the outer cloak he was wearing over that bed and over the baby. Other guests came in and began to take their outer garments off and they threw them on top of that one, another on top of that one. When the mom came a little while later to check on

her newborn, she found that the baby had suffocated to death and that's truly where we are in Christmas today. The garb of mythologizing has been thrown over the message of Christmas. The garb of commercializing, the garb of minimizing the true meaning and on and on we can go.

But for us, for those who have been saved by his grace, it's all about worshiping him. The celebration that we think about when we look at that baby laying in Bethlehem's feed trough is that baby laying in Bethlehem's feed trough was the preexisting one. That baby laying in Bethlehem's feed trough was the prestigious one. And that baby laying in Bethlehem's feed trough was and is the preeminent one because the baby born of Mary and laid in the feed trough in Bethlehem was God. Let's celebrate that. Let's rejoice in that. Let's worship this Christmas.

Let's bow together in prayer.